

Burma Regime Defies UN with Sham Referendum and Election

On 9 February the junta announced that it would hold a referendum on its new constitution in May, and general elections in 2010. However, the constitution enshrines military rule, giving 25 percent of the seats to the military, and also gives the military effective veto power over decisions made by Parliament.

By going ahead with the next steps of its so-called 7 stage road map to democracy, the regime is sending a strong message that it is not genuine about engaging with the United Nations in a real process of national reconciliation and reform. It is no coincidence that the announcement comes at a time when the regime is facing increasing economic sanctions following its brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in September last year. The USA, EU, Australia, and Canada have all announced new economic sanctions. In February the USA introduced new sanctions targeting business cronies of the regime, and further sanctions are being considered by Congress. The EU is also considering strengthening sanctions when it renews the EU Common Position in April.



The regime's claims that it is committed to moving towards democracy run completely at odds with the facts on the ground. Since the September uprising they have continued to arrest activists. There are now more than 1,800 political prisoners, an increase of more than 700 from the year before. The regime is also stepping up its campaign of ethnic cleansing in Eastern Burma. The UN has condemned the regime for breaking the Geneva Convention by deliberately targeting civilians in Eastern Burma. More than half a million people are internally displaced after being forced to flee their homes.

Observers warn that the regime will do everything it can to fix the outcome of the referendum and elections. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a regime-run militia, will organise the referendum. It was the USDA that attacked Aung San Suu Kyi's convoy on May 30th 2003 and beat around 100 NLD supporters to death in the attack. There are no proper lists of potential voters in the country and political parties such as the National League for Democracy are not allowed to operate freely. Monks, nuns and other religious groups are barred from voting. It is also illegal to criticise the draft constitution, and to do so is punishable by up to 20 years in jail.

Burma's democracy movement condemns referendum

In response to the regime's referendum announcement, National League for Democracy (NLD) spokesperson U Thein Nyunt said, "We do not believe that there will be a free and fair referendum and election, because the junta has a tradition of breaking its promises including its promise on the 1990 election. So, we think this is only a violation of human rights and democracy."

The All Burma Monks Alliance, who played a leading role in the September uprising, issued a statement condemning the junta's plan. The statement said "we denounce the military regime's announcement 1/2008 and 2/2008 as these statements are unable to realize the real desire of the people and just intend to perpetuate the military dictatorship... We believe that a tripartite dialogue between the election winning party National League for Democracy, the military regime and ethnic representatives will be the only way to solve the national crises and lead the country towards to democracy."



A statement from the 88 Generation Students group, another major pro-democracy group, said, "The regime is attempting to legalize the military dictatorship with a sham-constitution. We believe that the military regime will use its security forces and its militias, USDA and Swan Arr Shin, to force the people to vote for its constitution and will also use any means possible, including force, to make its constitution approved in the referendum." The group also called for tri-partite dialogue and called on UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to visit Burma as soon as possible.

UN Human Rights Expert reports continuing arrests in Burma

Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, reported back to the Human Rights Council in Geneva, detailing the continuing arrest and detention of activists in Burma, five months after the crackdown on the September uprising. He also found at least 31 people were killed, double the figure the regime claimed, and between 3000 to 4000 people had been arrested in September and October. He also expressed serious concern regarding the health conditions of some of the prisoners who require immediate medical care.

US tightens sanctions on Junta and business cronies

The US Treasury Department has announced that it is tightening financial sanctions against the generals and their business cronies. The measures target Burmese billionaire Tay Za's Htoo group of companies, which carry out key projects on behalf of the regime, including the purchase of military equipment and aircraft. The US stated it would continue to take action against the junta and those who prop it up so long as human rights violations continue.

NLD encourages pro-junta ethnic groups for talks

The National League for Democracy (NLD), has invited ethnic armed ceasefire groups who are aligned with the junta for talks to resolve their differences. The NLD said it "understands that their freely made opinions and denunciations are part of democratic practice. Likewise, bilateral discussion is the essence of democracy." The NLD repeated that they focused on the welfare of all ethnic nationalities and the Union as a whole.

Complainant threatened not to disclose truth to ILO

Two people who were used as forced labour for a road building by the regime made a complaint to the International Labour Organization (ILO) office in Rangoon, according to Mizzima news. However, when ILO official Steve Marshall went to meet

the complainants on 31st of January they were threatened by the authorities not to disclose the truth. The two complainants were under pressure and not able to say anything to the ILO investigating official.

Blogger charged under Emergency Provision Act

Nay Phone Latt, a young Burmese blogger who went missing on January 29, is believed to be in detention and has been charged under Article 5 (j) of the Emergency Provision Act. The Burmese military junta has widely used Article 5 (j), which has a penalty of up to seven years imprisonment, as a tool in suppressing dissidents and activists. So far there is no date for his trial.

Burma extends arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi's deputy

Burma's military rulers extended the house arrest of U Tin Oo, the deputy leader of the NLD. He was arrested along with Aung San Suu Kyi in May 2003 and was initially held in prison in the northwest of Burma. In February 2004 U Tin Oo was brought back to his home in Rangoon, where he has been held ever since.

Russian company signs gold exploration deal with Burma

Russia's Victorious Glory International Pte Ltd signed an agreement with Burma's military regime to search for gold in northwestern Burma, the state-run media reported. The deal allows them to look for gold as well as other mineral exploration in the northwest of Burma, an area that is known to have rich deposits of gold and other minerals.

Rambo Draws World's Attention to Forgotten Crisis in Burma



Sylvester Stallone's new Rambo film premiered in London in February. Burmese refugees who have been forced to flee their homes following attacks on their villages attended the premier.

The fourth Rambo movie is set in Karen State, Eastern Burma, where the country's brutal military dictatorship is engaged in ethnic cleansing against the Karen people. Rambo goes into Burma to rescue aid workers who have been kidnapped by the regime.

"By setting Rambo in Burma, Sylvester Stallone has done more than governments or the United Nations to draw attention to the crisis going on out of sight in the jungles of Eastern Burma," said Mark Farmaner, Director of the Burma Campaign UK. "The Karen people are being slaughtered, but the world looks the other way. Normally for a crisis on this scale you would see the UN going in with peacekeepers and aid."

Nobel Peace Prize winners call for Arms Embargo

Nine Nobel Peace Prize recipients released a public statement on 19 February calling for the international community and the United Nations Security Council to impose an arms embargo on Burma.

"We appeal to the members of the Security Council, and the international community, to take action quickly on measures that will prevent the sale of arms to the Burmese military, including a ban on banking transactions targeting top Burmese leaders, as well as state and private entities that support the government's weapons trade," the statement reads.

The statement was issued by Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu and signed by his holiness the Dalai Lama, Shirin Ebadi, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Mairead Maguire, Rigoberta Menchu Tum, Prof. Elie Wiesel, Betty Williams and Jody Williams.

Burma tops list for landmines

The Landmine Monitor Report 2007 by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines reported that the Burmese regime is one of only two governments in the world that is using anti-personnel landmines on an ongoing basis.

Ten out of fourteen states and divisions in Burma suffer from some degree of mine contamination, primarily ceasefire antipersonnel mines. The report also highlighted the usage of landmines by armed groups who are allied with regime.

The military junta has not acceded to the international Mine Ban Treaty, and was one of 17 countries that abstained from voting on UN General Assembly Resolution 61/84 landmines in December 2006.

Democracy leader assassinated



On 14th February Padoh Mahn Sha Lar Phan, General Secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU), was shot dead by two gunmen at his home in the town of Mae Sot on the Thailand Burma border. Information obtained by the Burma Campaign UK indicates that the assassination was organised by the regime in collaboration with two Karen organisations, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, and the so-called KNU Peace Council, which defected from the KNU and are now working closely with the regime.

Padoh Mahn Sha dedicated his life to the struggle for freedom and democracy in Burma. He was a unifying force, respected by all parts of the democracy movement. One of his daughters, Zoya Phan, is International Coordinator at the Burma Campaign UK. Zoya and her sister and brothers issued the following statement, which was read at the funeral of their father.

Funeral Statement

We have lost a great father, and a great leader. We were lucky to have a father who was caring and full of love. He gave us guidance and support, and taught us tolerance and to stand against injustice. He could not give us wealth or luxury, but ensured that we had an education and the opportunity to fulfill our potential.

He was always humble, yet a strong and brave leader. He dedicated his life to the struggle, and always put the welfare of his people and his country before himself. His example of determination and self-sacrifice to win our freedom won him the love and respect of not just the Karen people, but also the Burmese democracy movement and of freedom loving people around the world.

He will be remembered by many not only as an inspirational leader, but also on a personal level for the many acts of kindness he performed for those who needed help.

We are proud to be his children, as all Karen people and all people who long for freedom in Burma are proud of him.

Our father may be dead, but we will remember him. He taught us that it was our duty to work for the Karen people, and as his children we will continue his dedicated work towards true freedom for our people and peace in our country. His determination for freedom and democracy lives on within us and within the Karen people.

Our father lived for the principles of freedom and democracy. He believed in the unity of the Karen people against our common enemy, and in the unity of all the ethnic nationalities and people of Burma, knowing that only together can we bring freedom to our land, protect our culture and traditions, and fight poverty, hunger and disease.

What the SPDC are trying to do by killing our father is to try to kill what he stood for. We must not let them succeed. The assassination of our father must serve as a wake up call to everyone. All Karen people must realise that the only people that benefit from our division are the SPDC. Why do we let our enemy divide us? There is one Karen people. Why are we divided? We do not want revenge for the killing of our father. The best justice, what our father would want, is unity. As our father did, we love all the Karen people.

We appeal to those Karen soldiers in our country who are not with the KNLA. Come back to us, come back to the KNU. Let us be one family again. United and strong. And to Karen people all over the world, forced to leave our country, join with us wherever you are to fight for justice and freedom.

Not just the Karen, but all the freedom loving people of Burma must work together for our freedom. This is what our father worked for. We call on all democratic forces to unite against the common enemy.

And to the international community; the assassination of our father shows once again that the regime is lying to you when they say they have a roadmap to democracy. Our father dedicated his life to the struggle for a democratic Burma. That is why they killed him.

Our father worked for a political solution to bring peace and democracy to our country. He worked for a stable federal Burma which would bring peace and development. Our father, and democracy leaders like him, did not get the support from the United Nations and others that they should have. The international community must stop fooling itself that the SPDC will reform itself and change. Instead they must start working with leaders of the democracy movement to bring real change to our country.

We are very grateful for the many messages of support and sympathy that we have received from all over the world. At a time of such sadness for us it has been a great comfort to hear from so many people, and to know how much love and respect people had for our father. We know that many of you are feeling sad and downhearted. That is not what our father would want. He would want you to pay tribute to him by working twice as hard, to be strong and to unified. If you loved our father, the best way to show it is to fight to fulfil his dream of freedom. Don't let what he stood for die with him.

Our father's death does not leave us weaker. It shows that we are strong. They killed our father because they are afraid of him and what he stood for. By killing him the regime have shown us what they are afraid of, and so we know that to follow our father's path is to follow the path to freedom.

He knew that divided we are weak, and together we are strong. He knew we must work with all democratic forces and all ethnic nationalities to bring freedom and peace to our people.

He believed in equality. We may have different languages and different cultures and traditions, but we are all equal. We have the same rights regardless of our ethnic group, or whether we are a man or a woman.

He believed in self sacrifice. Freedom will not be given to us. We must all dedicate ourselves to the struggle to win back our freedom, so that no more generations grow up in fear and in poverty.

But above all he believed in the four principles of Saw Ba U Gyi:

For us surrender is out of the question.

The recognition of Karen State must be complete.

We shall retain our arms.

We shall decide our own political destiny.

Our father did not live to see freedom for our people,
but his dream will be fulfilled.

The Karen, and all the people of Burma, will be free.
We shall never surrender.

Saw Say Say
Nant Bwa Bwa Phan
Nant Zoya Phan
Slone Phan

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